

**Virginia Marine Resources Commission
Blue Crab Management Advisory Committee Meeting
VMRC Conference Room**

MINUTES June 19, 2012

Members Present

Marshall Cox
Ty Farrington
Wayne France
Chris Moore
Tom Powers
Ken Smith

VMRC Staff

Rob O'Reilly
Joe Grist
Joe Cimino
Adam Kenyon
Allison Watts
MPO Grady Ellis

Members Absent

H.M. Arnold
Jim Casey
Jeff Crockett
Dan Dise
Pete Freeman
Johnny Graham
Paige Hogge
Ronnie Jett
Peter Nixon
Hon. Joe Palmer
Hon. Rick Robins

Others Present

Danielle McCulloch
Michael Seebo
Robert Hollowell
Gregory Perry
Mark Sanford
Reid Vrablitz
Tim Wivell

The minutes were recorded by Ms. Allison Watts.

I. Introductions/Announcements

Mr. Rob O'Reilly called the meeting to order at 6:05 pm as there was no chairman present. There were not enough members present to have a quorum. Mr. O'Reilly told the committee that there will be a discussion with the Commissioner about potentially removing inactive members from the list of the Crab Management Advisory Committee (CMAC) and adding new members.

Mr. Ken Smith announced that blue crab industry members have been meeting since May after the Virginia Marine Resources Commission (VMRC) approved the creation of a blue crab long-term visioning panel. The industry members have established their mission as to ensure sustainability of both crabs and watermen. The Virginia Waterman's Association will send out an invitational letter to all crab harvesters to increase participation. Mr. O'Reilly commented that while that

approach is considered co-management, industry members need to have the ability to form their own direction. A set of guiding principles, including the control rule and major issues, was provided to the industry panel by VMRC.

II. Approval of minutes from the March 20, 2012 and April 19, 2012 meetings

Approval was delayed until the September CMAC meeting.

III. Crab Dredge Subcommittee Update

Mr. O'Reilly explained the first Crab Dredge Subcommittee meeting was held at VMRC on May 17, 2012, with an attempt to have representatives from all areas of Virginia present. The crab dredge study this upcoming winter will address incidental mortality to crabs caused by dredging. Issues discussed at this meeting included: the high start-up cost for dredge vessels (to be subsidized by VMRC), the timing of the study (likely mid-December through February), the number of dredge vessels to participate (a maximum of four vessels), and potential study design. Mr. Ty Farrington asked for clarification about why the dredge fishery season was initially closed in 2008-2009, and Mr. O'Reilly explained it related to that fishery's contribution to the 34% reduction in harvest of female crabs. Mr. Farrington questioned the validity of having just four dredge vessels in the upcoming study, and Mr. O'Reilly stated that four vessels will simulate approximately ten percent of the dredging fleet that may exist today.

Mr. O'Reilly explained other issues discussed at the subcommittee meeting, including the variability in crab mortality relating to crab dredge captains' style of dredging and the study's ability to address public perception of crab dredging. Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) and VMRC staff will be present as on-board observers for 30 of the 42 days of crab dredging per vessel. Vessel captains will simultaneously perform the experiment and catch crabs, with a 40 bushel daily limit, which they will be permitted to sell as payment. The study design elements will be further planned by VIMS scientists before the next crab dredge subcommittee meeting in July. Mr. Smith asked about the new control rule recommended by the 2011 blue crab stock assessment. Mr. O'Reilly explained that the target abundance is 215 million spawning-age female crabs. Below 70 million spawning-age females, the crab stock is considered overfished. The removal rate target is 25.5% of spawning-age female crabs and the overfishing threshold is 34%. Mr. Smith stated that crab harvest mortality will be known for the crab dredge fishery but is unknown for other gears. Mr. O'Reilly explained that the exploitation rate is based on harvest mortality and does not account for non-harvest or incidental mortality of crabs, such as the mortality of spring peeler crabs or crabs in crab pots in the hot summer months. Mr.

Chris Moore asked about the harvest from the crab dredge study. Mr. O'Reilly explained it will be treated like a research set-aside but it will be reported. The study will be valuable to attain information about on-board and on-bottom crab mortality caused by dredging.

Mr. Marshall Cox asked about the possibility of reopening the crab dredge fishery, based upon the study's results. Mr. O'Reilly stated that staff cannot know the outcome of the experiment until it has been completed, but dredging will not likely be reopened by the Commission without the science produced by this winter's study. Mr. Powers asked about regional openings of crab dredging, and Mr. O'Reilly said this was discussed briefly in 2008 and may be considered again.

Mr. Michael Seebo of VIMS explained that he had received only eight crab dredge captain recommendations. Letters were not sent out to all eligible crab dredgers from 2008 but rather it was more feasible to contact the 15 different watermen's associations to submit recommendations. Mr. Cox stated that all crab dredge captains do not dredge the same as there are regional differences, and Mr. Seebo explained that VIMS scientists are attempting to have representation from all areas of Virginia in the study. Letters will be sent out to the recommended captains to inquire about interest in participation and to explain the aspects of the study. Mr. Smith suggested sending out a letter from VMRC to former dredge harvesters to gauge their interest in returning to the crab dredge fishery if re-opened. Finally, Mr. Seebo explained that the study design is still under development and will be discussed further at the July subcommittee meeting.

IV. Crab Pot: Extending Season into December

Mr. Joe Grist updated CMAC on staff efforts to examine the possibility of a crab pot season extension into December. A December potting season has not existed since 1994 when it coexisted with a dredge fishery. Staff formerly looked at crab pot data from December 1994 and more recent harvest data from the month of November in order to project a potential December 2011 crab pot harvest, and will do the same for December 2012. This issue will be presented in further detail in September after the 2012 total crab harvest can be better projected. Mr. Cox recommended that water temperature be taken into consideration and Mr. Grist stated that staff can look at past water temperatures to compare to harvest. Mr. Farrington asked about the prohibition of female crabs after November 20, and Mr. Grist said that prohibition would be lifted if the crab potting season is extended into December. Mr. Moore asked about how much data will be available in September, and Mr. Grist said staff expects mandatory reporting data to be complete through June and potentially through July. Mr.

Farrington asked about where the idea of the crab pot season extension originated, and Mr. O'Reilly explained it was brought up by both CMAC and at the Commission last year.

V. Back Bay Blue Crab Management: House Bill 238

Mr. Chad Boyce of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) explained the history of Back Bay. The finfish species of that body of water fall under VDGIF jurisdiction, but it was previously unclear under which agency's jurisdiction the blue crabs fell. Beginning July 1, 2012, the blue crabs of Back Bay will officially fall under VMRC jurisdiction (per House Bill 238) and therefore anyone with a Commercial Fisherman Registration License can potentially harvest crabs there.

Managers at VDGIF would like VMRC to restrict crab harvest in Back Bay to crab pots only, thereby prohibiting peeler pots and the emergence of other fisheries that did not historically exist in Back Bay. Mr. O'Reilly added that all mandatory reporting to VMRC from Back Bay was reported primarily from crab pots, with a small percentage of harvest from peeler pots. While no harvest from crab scrapes has been reported since 1993, VDGIF does not want crab scrapes to be used as they will potentially damage the freshwater submerged aquatic vegetation. Mr. Cox asked why VDGIF requests to prohibit peeler pots, and Mr. Boyce explained peeler pots are more efficient at catching fish, especially small largemouth bass between eight and twelve inches in length. The VDGIF wants to reduce any gear interactions that may impede agency stocking and recovery efforts of largemouth bass in this body of water. Mr. Boyce also clarified that while eel potting has been allowed in Back Bay, it is technically prohibited by VDGIF regulation and, as of July 1, 2012, this prohibition will be fully enforced by VDGIF.

Mr. Farrington stated he is in support of continuing to allow peeler pots to be used in Back Bay. Mr. Cox recommended that crab pots and peeler pots be permitted since they are both historical gears in Back Bay, but crab scrapes be prohibited. Mr. Powers added his recommendation that VDGIF look into quantifying bycatch in peeler pots.

VI. Other Business

Mr. Powers informed the committee that at the recent meeting of the NOAA Chesapeake Bay-wide Ecosystem Goal Implementation Team, two important issues to blue crabs were discussed: the need to establish male crab reference points, and the potential need to allocate harvest between Maryland and Virginia.

VII. Next Meeting

The next CMAC meeting has been scheduled for September 18, 2012.

VIII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54 pm.